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Wednesday, August 29, 2007

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Fairies and Fantasy on the Plaza

Shakespeare Festival's 'A Midsummer Night's Dream' Hits Big With Jazz Age Production

by Jeff Favre

A donkey sings "Witchcraft." Fairies sport zoot suits. And the woods come alive, thanks to a hot jazz trio.

In other words, Ben Donenberg is up to his usual mischief when it comes to collaborating with William Shakespeare. And after 22 seasons, his Shakespeare Festival/LA under the Downtown Los Angeles night sky is anything but tired.

In fact, the company's latest production, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, which opened last week at the plaza of the Cathedral of Our Lady of the Angels and continues through July 22, might be its most joyous, accessible and funny production in many years.

Relocated to the Central Avenue of 1930s Los Angeles - then the jazz capital of the West Coast - this *Midsummer* swings like a Lionel Hampton hit and cracks wise like the Marx Brothers at their best.

In fact, Donenberg's latest is possibly one of the best new-look Shakespeare productions the city has seen. While maintaining the script's integrity, he finds numerous ways both to update the story and increase its humor. The



The production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* at the plaza of the Cathedral of Our Lady of the Angels features nine swing-era songs. Hermia (Dawn Lyen Gardner) and Lysander (Christopher Michael Rivera). Photo by Craig Schwartz.



versatile cast turns in an ensemble performance that will delight Shakespeare fans and novices alike.

Shakespeare's Athens has been replaced by colorful Central Avenue, complete with an ongoing soundtrack provided by a live band. The players, dressed in swing-era attire, dance onto the scene and begin telling the story of mixed up lovers who become the unwitting playthings of supernatural beings.

Oberon (Lester Purry) and his right-hand fairy Puck (Anthony Manough) use a love potion that wreaks havoc on the emotions of Hermia and Lysander (Dawn Lyen Gardner and Christopher Michael Rivera), as well as Helena and Demetrius (Raina Simone Moore and A.K. Murtadha). Oberon doesn't spare his beloved Titania (J.

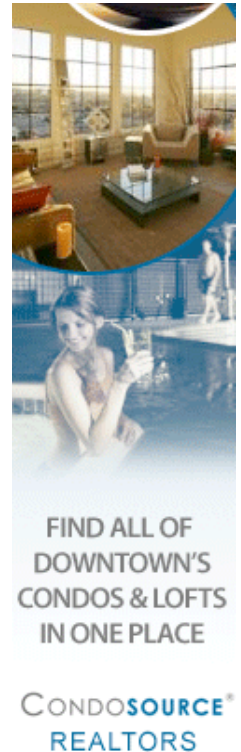
Karen Thomas) either, deluding her into falling for Bottom (Geoffrey Owens), a hapless townsman who has been turned into a donkey by Puck. As usual, Shakespeare straightens out the mess with weddings and the reliable (at least in his comedies) happily ever after.

One of Donenberg's many creative choices is turning *Midsummer* into a semi-musical. Nine theme-appropriate songs from the early jazz era are integrated into the story, including "It's Only a Paper Moon," "I've Got You Under My Skin," "A Kiss to Build a Dream On," and "What a Little Moonlight Can Do." Donenberg does a remarkable job of choreographing several complex pieces of physical comedy, including a fight scene in which everyone loses their clothes.

There are no weak performances, but it's easy to name the strongest: Owens, as Bottom, earns laughs with virtually every line he utters, whether through the smallest inflection or the biggest hand gesture. During the opening night performance, when Owens stopped speaking to watch a helicopter fly over Downtown, he collected one of the evening's biggest laughs. He also led what must be one of the funniest ever renditions of *Midsummer's* climactic play within a play.

Gardner gives an impressive performance as Hermia. In an instant, she is able to take Hermia from Lysander's doting lover to Helena's venomous rival - all with equal doses of humor.

None of the work by Donenberg and his cast would be as effective without several impressive visual elements. Fred Duer's set design, a dreamlike kaleidoscope of classic jazz clubs, is the perfect backdrop for this fantasy folly. The costumes, designed by Fontella Boone, are worthy of a designer's



runway show. Pinstripe suits and angelic white dresses for the female fairies reflect the jazz era, as well as properly define the characters.

Then there's the music, expertly performed by the trio of Steve Pandis on bass, Matt Falker on piano and Kyle Luck on drums.

Donenberg proves that Shakespeare in the right hands can be as timely as it is timeless and as funny as it is emotionally satisfying.

A Midsummer Night's Dream is at the plaza of the Cathedral of Our Lady of the Angels through July 22, 555 W. Temple St., (213) 975-9891 or ShakespeareFestivalLA.org.

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